

Pioneer Press, March 31, 2005

When World War II veteran Milton Greenfield saw a fellow tank officer tumble out of a vehicle near Bastogne, France he didn't waste any time sprinting after the wounded man and dragging him away under heavy fire.

But his government took about 60 years to give him the Distinguished Service Medal for his trouble.

Tuesday U.S. Congressman Mark Kirk, R-10th, pinned the medal on him, and gave him another eight medals the U.S. Army somehow missed getting to him.

The Northbrook resident owned a Morton Grove candy distribution company, Five Star Distributors, for years, but it was in France that he made history.

"Many of us have seen the movie about the Battle of the Bulge, and remember the big moment when (Gen. George) Patton's tanks broke through," Kirk said.

"That was Milton."

And it was Milton Greenfield who thought he saw a bedroll fall out of a tank Jan. 8, 1945.

"He looked through his field glasses, and thought he saw the bedroll get up," Kirk said. "He recognized it as a guy he knew and thought right away that the guy had two children, and he went after him and dragged him back 175 yards, through fire on three sides."

When Greenfield dropped the wounded man at the first aid station, he watched as the medics swept a river of blood off the floor with a big push broom. "My God, I must have been nuts," he remembered saying to himself.

"I don't believe in this hero stuff," Greenfield said. "If you thought about it before you did it, you'd never do it. The law of self-preservation is too strong."

Greenfield has been retired for 23 years, and has been a volunteer on the information desk at Skokie's Rush North Shore Hospital ever since. At 89, he still frequently plays 18 holes of golf.

He came very close 60 years ago to never taking up the game. On Jan. 11, 1945, his tank was hit by German fire, and a piece of shrapnel sliced off the head of one of his fellow tank operators, removed one of Greenfield's own fingers, then continued into his groin.

He saw his fellow crewman's head laying on the floor of the tank. "I passed out, and the next thing I saw was a round blue sky" as he lay on his back, looking through the hole where the turret used to be. "Looking around, I saw that everybody was gone."

Greenfield didn't talk about the war for decades, his wife said. "When he first came back after the war, he was home many years and didn't talk about what it was like in the Army," said Roslyn, his wife of 62 years. "I knew he had four tanks shot out from under him, but that was all I knew. When the kids got older, they started questioning him, and got him going. Since this has come up, again, I've learned a lot and I'm really proud of him."

The medals may never have been awarded to Greenfield because initially he moved from hospital to hospital. Or military records lost in a long-ago St. Louis fire might have derailed their presentation, Greenfield said.

Last year, Greenfield was invited by Kirk to the opening of the World War II memorial in Washington, D.C. "I had a really nice time," the senior said.

"Two of my sons and a grandson kept pestering him (Kirk) about the medals. I forgot about it, until two weeks ago, when I got a call, that they found some records, and the medals are coming through."

Kirk's Waukegan office manager, Roy Czajkowski, traced the records to come up with the decorations, Kirk said.

"I appreciate all they've done. It's a good medal," Greenfield said, referring to the Distinguished Service Medal, one of the highest awards for courage the U.S. military bestows.

Greenfield still mourns his fallen tank comrades, and the hundreds of thousands of other U.S. GI's who never came home from World War II.

"I also think all the time about the kids who are being killed today," Greenfield said. "We thought World War II would be the war to end all wars. I guess we were wrong."